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SHORT COMMUNICATION

Ranatra linearis (L.) (Heteroptera: Nepidae) in flight—My numerous previous encounters with *Ranatra* had left me in no doubt that it must fly quite frequently, as I have regularly found adults in isolated, ephemeral water bodies. Clegg (1952) simply states that it ‘can fly’, but Chinery (1972) erroneously states that it is winged but flightless. I had long harboured a great desire to see the water stick-insect fly, as it looks such an unlikely aeronaut. At c.11.45 am on 12.v.2000, I was using a pond net to sample some small, temporary pools on Churt Flashes, Surrey (SU83). I had never seen *Ranatra* there before, despite annually dipping the ponds since 1988. With the first trawl of my net I caught a large adult. Unusually the bug adopted a sprightly stance right up on the tips of its tarsi. Just for a second I thought the impossible might happen, but it didn’t, so I placed it back in the water. A minute later at the next pond my friend Dr Rob McGibbon and I were treated to the most amazing sight of a *Ranatra* (possibly the one I had just caught) on the wing. It flew at about shoulder height with the body and front legs held parallel to the ground. The middle and hind legs were outstretched downwards at 90° to the body, and the tarsi appeared to be pressed together. The abdomen showed up bright red, and at a casual glance it could easily be mistaken for a red damselfly (*Ceriatrigon* or *Pyrrhosoma*), if it wasn’t for the very peculiar direct and level flight, with wide slow turns. This is at odds with Joan Hardingham’s observations of a *Ranatra* flying in Suffolk (Chalkley, 1996). She stated that the “body is held at 60°”, but also that ‘the wings are of a russetty colour like an earwig’s’, presumably as a result of confusing the wings (which are colourless) with the abdomen beneath.

This all too brief excursion into the air was curtailed by a headlong kamikaze dive at the pond edge ending in a half-submerged crash landing. The bug remained in this position for at least five minutes. The combination of shock and delight had left me doubled up in hysterics and my companion clearly feared for my sanity, until I explained just how privileged we were to see such a rare sight.

That this phenomenon should be observed on a fairly typical warm spring day makes it all the more surprising that it isn’t witnessed more often.—JONTY DENTON, 2 Sandown Close, Alton, Hants GU34 2TG, UK

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